DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 191 PS 011 782

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TITLE Brotherhood/Sisterhood Begin at Home: Notes on Sibling Rivalry.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict Resolution; Emotional Experience; Family (Sociological Unit); Interpersonal Relationship; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; Problem Solving; *Siblings

ABSTRACT

Parents who are frequently frustrated and troubled by rivalry among their children may find the following suggestions helpful. If fighting between siblings is bothersome, stop it. Don't lecture, moralize or nag. Once the unpleasant behavior is stopped, look for possible causes and ways of dealing with it. Children's versions of disputes and other troubles should be acknowledged, even if they are wrong. For instance, preschool children who indicate that they feel left out can be helped if adults give them individual attention and participate with them in an activity they really enjoy. It is important to reassure a child that attention will be given to each individual person's unique needs. Resist the temptation to motivate children by comparing them to others. Children can help parents understand other children. Parents should genuinely listen to their children's insights and suggestions and let them know their insights have warranted notice and reflection. Children should be taught to take pleasure in one another's good fortune. They consistently should be reminded of their unalterable or irrevocable belonging to their parents and to each other. To do so strengthens their inner sense of safety, which is perhaps a prerequisite for the development of the capacity for brotherly and sisterly love. (Author/RH)

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Brotherhood/Sisterhood Begin At Home: Notes on Sibling Rivalry

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PS011782

November, 1979

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NOTES ON SIBLING RIVALRY

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Most parents are uncomfortable when their children fight and tease each other. The popular view seems to be that this kind of behavior, generally called sibling rivalry, is both natural and inevitable. Perhaps we are born with a tendency to be competitive. (Although, theoretically we could just as likely be born with a tendency to be cooperative.) It is difficult to know for sure. Some rivalry among siblings may be inevitable, although it is not apparent in all families in all cultures. The point is that we do not have to stand by and let our children go at it. We don't have to put up with it. Brotherhood and sisterhood can and should begin at home. A brief look at some of the major elements of sibling rivalry may be helpful.

Rivalry is a term which describes what people do when they pursue or compete for the same things. But it only occurs when the rivals or competitors believe, correctly or not, that what they want is in scarce supply. When there's plenty of food, people don't fight to get to the front of the line. But the minute they believe that something worth having might run out, contention begins. Perhaps that is truly natural!

Jealousy, on the other hand, refers to feelings of apprehension and anxiety about the possibility of losing out to competitors. Jealousy usually signals feelings of inadequacy, or fear that one might not have what it takes to get and to keep someone's attention, loyalty or affection--at least as compared to others' ability to do so. When feelings of jealousy persist they take on the characteristics of envy.

The term envy refers to feelings of ill-will towards those who seem to have an edge over us, who seem to have personal and/or material advantages over us. Envy is often accompanied by resentful dislike, even hatred, of those who seem to have what we want, or by feelings of discontent with one's own lot in life.

Growing up in a culture which scorns such negative feelings only makes matters worse. It is bad enough to feel this way about others in the family. But to learn that such feelings are also wicked just convinces us of our real unworthiness! To approve or encourage expression of such feelings in our children is not a useful approach to the problem of sibling rivalry, however.

Most parents are really frustrated and troubled by the squabbling and teasing of their children. Of course such behavior can have causes other than sibling rivalry. But if you are reasonably sure that the scrapping is due to sibling competition, some of the approaches outlined below might be useful.

If fighting between your children bothers you, stop it. Resist the temptation to lecture, moralize or nag about it. Whatever technique you use (e.g., commanding the children to stop, separating them, etc.) stay with your resolve to stop the fighting until the episode is really over, since your persistence increases the credibility of your commands and strengthens your authoritativeness. For example, sometimes children start to quarrel when a parent is on the phone. The pleas or threats uttered to children while the person on the other end of the line is speaking may not work. If necessary, hang up the phone and stay on top of the situation

and implement your plan. (Most phone calls can be fruitfully resumed at a later time). The long range benefits of effective responsive authority to both you and the children are irreplaceable. Keep in mind, also, that often children are waiting for you to exert your authority, and by their behavior are saying "Help me to be the kind of person you want me to be because that is the kind of person I want to be."

Once the unpleasant behavior is stopped, we can then look at possible causes, and ways of dealing with it. To return to the idea that rivalry is a function of scarcity--when scraps occur with troubling frequency and intensity, ask yourself what it is that one or all of the children perceives to be in short supply. Could it be affection, praise, recognition or other forms of attention? Whatever the child believes, correctly or incorrectly, it is helpful to acknowledge his or her perceptions even though you do not agree with them. For instance, if your child perceives herself to be less loved by you or less important to you than others are, acknowledge her right to see things that way. Don't protest her version of the situation. Defensive responses usually signify that, deep down, you agree with the attack!

One of the most effective ways to help preschoolers who feel left out in this way is to spend time alone with that child, doing what she or he really enjoys. A walk around the block. Reading stories, looking at books, cooking or gardening. Make sure it is something the child enjoys. It doesn't have to be expensive or complex--just enjoyable. Ten minutes a day for a week can turn around a preschooler's feelings of being left out or unimportant.

Another point to remember is that treating children alike is sure to be unfair. When you treat children alike, you teach them to expect to be treated alike, and they then push you into giving them equal amounts of various things--although it is very unlikely that children within a family will ever all need the same things in the same amounts or at the same time. If one child seeks comfort and another demands "equal time," reassure the second one that when the time comes, when he or she needs comfort, you will be right there, ready to provide it, as you have done for this child many times in the past when he needed your exclusive attention. It is important to reassure a child that each individual person's unique needs are responded to--not that they all get the same responses.

Another point which might help is to resist the temptation to motivate your children by comparing them to each other, or to other people's children. For example, avoid saying to a child something like "whenever I go to Aunt Jane's house her children always help with the dishes," or "they always go to sleep by 8:00 o'clock," or "when I was your age I always did such and such." Comparisons of that kind teach children that they are in constant danger of coming out poorly in a contest, and a habit of competitiveness may develop.

Another approach which can be helpful is to take advantage of frequent opportunities to let one of your children help you to understand another. Depending upon their actual ages, and the age differences between them, youngsters can be effective in the role of insight sharer--helping parents to understand what a sibling is struggling with, is thinking or trying to express. If you ask a child to help you in this way, take his contributions seriously. Listen to what he has suggested, and let him know that you have

reflected on the insights he has shared. When soliciting a child's ideas about what he or she thinks a sibling needs, be sure you are genuinely interested in his input. Phoniness with children generally backfires, especially in the long run.

Another approach worth trying is to take advantage of opportunities to teach children to take pleasure in each other's good fortune. When something really good happens to one of the children in a family, take an inclusive approach by inviting the others to join in, to bask in the reflected glory of a sibling. For example, if one child in the family can really draw beautiful pictures, encourage the others to appreciate and admire them. If you find yourself scraping the bottom of the barrel and saying something like "well, that's all right, you are good at X," you suggest that everybody has to be good at something special "or else!" And that is not the case at all. Being good at art doesn't make someone a better person, only a better artist, and we don't have to be artists to be estimable.

Finally, if your children say genuinely nasty things about one another to you, use those occasions to indicate that you do not agree, that even though we get angry with each other, we still belong to each other. For example, if a boy describes his sister to you in very unflattering terms, is seems to help to let him know that no matter how unpleasant the sister's behavior or attributes may seem to be at the moment, she still is and always will be "one of us." This response to the brother's insults reassures him that if a sibling had ill feelings toward him you would not let his belonging to the family be endangered. When we consistently remind children

of their unalterable or irrevocable belonging to us, and to each other, we strengthen their inner sense of safety, which is perhaps a prerequisite for the development of the capacity for brotherly and sisterly love.